

# Care of insensate skin

## What is insensate skin?

**Insensate skin** occurs when the skin in some parts of the body is lacking in sensation or feeling. If a child has a spinal cord injury or spina bifida, it can affect the ability to detect sensations like pressure, pain, and hot and cold temperatures. Insensate skin breakdown can take weeks or months to heal.

## Common causes of insensate skin

When a child is unable to detect painful sensations, they will be unaware of any injuries that may have occurred and may not get appropriate treatment early enough to prevent further skin damage. **Common examples include:**

- pressure from sitting or lying in the same position for long periods of time
- clothing that is too tight
- rubbing from poorly fitting orthoses (splints)
- bath/shower water that is too hot
- walking barefoot on hot sand/concrete in summer
- sitting on hot surfaces in summer
- scraping toes on rough swimming surfaces
- sunburn
- resting hot food/drink on laps
- sand between toes.

## How to care for your child's skin and help reduce the risk of skin breakdown

- Perform a daily skin check, paying particular attention to the high-risk areas. Children can be shown how to use a mirror to view their sacrum and buttocks.
- Shower regularly and ensure skin is well dried.
- Review orthotics (splints) regularly with your orthotist to ensure they fit well. Perform a skin check each time orthoses are worn.
- Move and shift weight regularly to reduce pressure on the skin.
- Maintain good nutrition to assist with healing after a skin injury.
- Use high factor sunscreen.

## What to look out for

Red marks, discoloured or broken skin in the following high-risk areas:

- bony areas such as the feet, ankles, the sacrum (tail bone) and buttocks
- underneath hand or foot splints/plaster casts
- in the nappy area, particularly in newborns/infants with spina bifida.



## What to do if you find a red mark or broken skin

Remove all pressure from the injured skin, including splints and tight clothing.

If the skin injury is to the back, sacrum, or buttock, transfer your child out of their wheelchair and lie them on their side to relieve all pressure on the injury.

In the case of injury to your child's feet, remove their splints and do not allow them to weight bear by walking or standing.

Monitor the area closely. If the skin remains red, discoloured or broken, seek prompt medical advice. During office hours, please contact the spinal rehabilitation nurse specialists.

## Newborns and infants with spina bifida

Always use a simple barrier protection, such as Vaseline, on the nappy area. This allows a layer of protection between faeces and urine and the skin. If the skin in the nappy area becomes broken or starts to bleed, please seek advice from the spinal rehabilitation nurse specialists.

For more information or assistance, please email: [pch.kidsrehabnurses@health.wa.gov.au](mailto:pch.kidsrehabnurses@health.wa.gov.au)



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